"If you can call it that. Looks more like cold sleep to me."

"Doctor, in all good conscience, I cannot recommend intervention. I can't even guess how it would affect the Captain. Shock, death, no effect at all-- We're walking blind."

They lay together just out of reach of the surf, spent, wrapped in a sweet calm with nothing of the after-sadness in it. Jim was himself again, separate but no longer alone. There was nothing now that they did not know about each other, nothing that was not accepted and cherished. Spock picked up the thought and turned slightly to press his lips against the cool thigh under his cheek. Liar. Laughter came with the word. You never did steal apples.

"How will the transporter affect them?"

"It's not something I'd care to think about, much less try."

Spock disengaged his arms and sat up, a tinge of anxiety clear in his thoughts. The other world was beginning to intrude, even here; the tie between them stretched thin. "Jim, we must break the meld."

It had been inevitable, or course. He turned his face away. "Go ahead." You can't lose what you never really had, call it a dream and be done....

"No dream, Jim. Reality, if you wish."

"If I--do you?"

Spock bent toward him and they kissed. "Yes. I love you."

"Strike me."

A blow.

"Again."

Another.

"Again."

A third.

Spock drew a deep breath, like a surfacing diver. "Thank you, Dr. M'Benga. That will be sufficient."

Jim Kirk lay on the hot dry earth of Beta Cassiopiae IV with his head in Spock's lap and his left arm strapped to a portable transfusion unit. McCoy, his face concerned and bemused, was hunkered down beside him.

"Bones--"

The doctor laid a hand on his arm. "It's okay, Jim. Don't try to talk. Just lie still and we'll have you back to the ship in no time." M'Benga was already pulling out his communicator.

Jim glanced up at Spock, the corners of his mouth just rising in what would have to do for a smile.

Spock's own mouth curved almost imperceptibly as he took Jim's free hand in his warmer one. Joy and astonishment swept through Kirk. Quietly, Spock said, "I am not ashamed any more."